Sally Witherspoon, PhD: Learning from 360-Degree Feedback

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Sally Witherspoon* examined her 360-degree data. As part of the pre-work for the Women Leaders' Workshop (WLW) that she was attending, Witherspoon, like all the other participants, had filled out a questionnaire on herself and had simultaneously asked 15 colleagues plus her manager to rate her on Kouzes & Posner's Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI), an instrument based on their leadership model.[1] She had received anonymous feedback from 10 of her 15 colleagues, and one response designated from her manager, Bob Blackstone. As she stared at her data and calculated the numbers in her head, she noted that the differences between her 10 observers and Blackstone were consistently at odds on the five dimensions of leadership behaviors, but none were as differentiated as the behavior "inspire a shared vision:" Blackstone rated Witherspoon drastically lower than did her other observers (See **Exhibit 1**).

As Witherspoon pulled her attention back to her colleagues in the WLW, a program sponsored by Legend Corporation, her employer, the director of WLW announced to the 32 participants that it was time to begin the rotation through three activities that would be 50 minutes each: work by oneself; talk with an assigned executive coach; and meet and talk with a peer mentor who was one of her fellow WLW participants. Witherspoon was assigned to first work by herself, then her executive coach, and finally with her peer mentor. Witherspoon was glad that she was going to have time to digest her data on her own before she would need to share her manager's feedback with anyone else. As Witherspoon struggled emotionally with the feedback from her manager, she simultaneously knew that she needed to prepare for her up-coming conversations with her executive coach and peer mentor. She asked herself: "what should I say to them about my feedback? Should I share my actual data?" Trying to calm herself, Witherspoon felt that she needed to have a conversation with Blackstone: "what message is he sending to me with his low LPI scores? Should I send an email to him now to set up a meeting? How will I hold a conversation with him and not cry?"

WITHERSPOON'S BACKGROUND

In 2011, Witherspoon earned her doctorate in statistics from a prominent university and was quickly hired as a statistician by Alan Avery, PhD, at Legend Corporation, a global high technology company with approximately 100,000 employees. The company competed aggressively in the artificial intelligence business. Through the following

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seven years, Witherspoon established a highly productive relationship with Avery. They had published papers together and had made joint presentations at conferences.

Feeling valued at Legend Corporation, Witherspoon expected that she would continue her career in the high-tech industry, and, in particular, at Legend. As a doctoral student, Witherspoon questioned whether she wanted an academic career or a career in industry, but her ambivalence had long since evaporated as she contributed to Avery's Artificial Intelligence team. Witherspoon, along with her colleagues, found their mission of researching and producing new technologies to "fix" human problems to be inspiring.

With the knowledge of Avery, in 2017 Witherspoon had reached out to Mary Malone, PhD, and Senior Vice President, to suggest that they present a paper together at a conference. The presentation was well received and Witherspoon established herself with Malone as a valuable colleague and future leader at Legend.

In 2018, Avery and Witherspoon decided that she should transfer to another area of AI to expand her knowledge of the field. Mr. Bob Blackstone, a sixty-something, 35-year veteran of Legend Corporation, became Witherspoon's new boss. Before she joined Blackstone's department, Witherspoon had not worked with him. Even though they met infrequently, they established a "cordial relationship," according to Witherspoon. She had learned a little about Blackstone's personal life: he was married and his wife did not engage in paid work. Since Witherspoon knew Blackstone's boss, John Jones, PhD, who also reported to Malone, Witherspoon felt comfortable enough in her new department.

Six months into her new position and department, Witherspoon learned that SVP Malone had nominated her to attend Legend's prestigious Women Leadership Workshop (WLW), the program for future women leaders of the company. Malone had attended a 2015 session of the program and found the concepts and suggestions on how to deal with gender issues and bias within Legend to be helpful.

As a married, 30-something, mother of two young children, Witherspoon had arrived at Legend at an opportune moment in the company's history. Silicon Valley and the technology industry's reputation for gender discrimination had been broadcast widely: from Tesla, Amazon Studios, Uber, to venture capital firms, such as Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers, women routinely received the short end of the stick.[2] Legend's CEO, however, had made a commitment to women: to hire, promote, and place them into leadership positions. Over the company's history, women had not been part of Legend's leadership teams: in consequence, the CEO and other executives on his team, realized that the company needed to make special efforts to hire and retain highly-educated, professional women. A diversity and inclusion "guru," Elizabeth Stanfield, was hired. She collected data on a number of dimensions related to the career progression of women and found that Legend had a poor advancement rate for women and lower salaries for its women scientists and executives in comparison to men within Legend. Stanfield initiated a number of programs, one of which was WLW. She had issued a Request for Proposals, and had received several from American and European universities. After personal visits, Stanfield selected a top-tier west coast university that specialized in designing and delivering executive education programs for women and was geographically convenient to Legend's headquarters.

WOMEN LEADERS' WORKSHOP, LEGEND CORPORATION

In 2013 the first cohort of Legend's women executives were selected and attended WLW. Legend had contracted with the university to send between 30 and 35 women to four sessions of WLW each year. As the first three or four cohorts of Legend women executives had been informed of their selection for the program, they had asked repeatedly: "Why am I being sent to a women's program?" However, once the credibility and usefulness of the program had been established, women considered it a feather in their cap to go to the program.

The curriculum of WLW aimed to enhance the women executives in three ways. They expanded their skills in leadership, negotiations, and team development through lectures and exercises. There was a module on the identification and articulation of strategies to deal with gender bias at Legend through live cases performed by professional actors. And there was the purposeful building of global networks within Legend with fellow participants and senior executives. The male allies, as the senior executives who participated in WLW were called, shared meals with participants, gave lectures, and served on panels on topics relevant to the program and the corporation. The allies listened carefully to the concerns and opinions of the women attending the program and invited the attendees to stay in touch with them.

On a Monday morning in November 2019, Witherspoon and 31 Legend colleagues from around the globe met and introduced themselves to one another. To enhance their connections, the women shared their stories of how they developed as leaders in groups of four and then rotated through other small groups, performing other tasks as a way to enhance relationships amongst the participants.

By 2 pm, the Faculty Director of WLW began to explain the Kouzes and Posner's (K&P) model of Exemplary Leadership. The model, widely known and accepted amongst practitioners, had first been published in the late 1980s under the title, *The Leadership Challenge*; in 2017 the authors published their sixth edition. Witherspoon had vaguely heard about the book. To set the stage for the afternoon's discussion of K & P's leadership model, the director explained the model in-depth. After a relevant exercise, tension among participants rose, as collectively they knew that it was time to receive their 360-degree feedback. If asked, participants might have responded: "oh, it's no big deal," but for Witherspoon there was anxiousness in the air as the director distributed the 360-degree feedback report to each participant.

360-DEGREE LPI FEEDBACK

Witherspoon opened her LPI to page 1. She read that 11 out of her 16 selected people had submitted feedback on her leadership behaviors. She turned the page and quickly saw "The Five Practices Data Summary" (see **Exhibit 1**). She was shocked. She read that her manager had scored her a "12" on the leadership behavior "Inspire a Shared Vision," whereas the average score of her other 10 observers was "51.6" (the LPI's scale is 10 to 60 points with ten being the lowest score and 60 the highest score). She reviewed the remaining 16 pages of the LPI. In those pages, the five practices were displayed as bar graphs; the 30 leadership behaviors were ranked from the most to the less frequently observed behaviors; and there was a percentile ranking page. At the end of the LPI report, there were responses to essay questions (See **Exhibit 2**). Witherspoon read the anonymous comments about herself carefully.

She felt her neck turn red as she struggled to make sense of her data. While she and the other WLW participants knew that none of their feedback would be sent to

anyone within Legend, Witherspoon was concerned with how her coach and peers within WLW would see her when they read her scores. As she read through her LPI, she knew that she had only about 30 minutes until her scheduled appointment with her coach. As she continued to struggle with her strong emotional reaction to the data from her boss, she asked herself:

"What should I say to my executive coach about my feedback? Should I share all of my LPI data (**Exhibits 1 & 2**) with my peer mentor? What choice will I have if she shares her data with me?"

"I know that I need to have a conversation with Blackstone. What message is he sending me with a score of 12 points out of 60 on 'Inspire a Shared Vision' and 28 points out of 60 on 'Model the Way?' When and how should I set up the meeting? Importantly, how will I keep my emotions in check and have a productive conversation with him?"

Exhibit 1 - Leadership Practices Inventory
The Five Practices Data Summary

Individual Feedback Report: Sally Witherspoon

The Five Leadership Practices: Kouzes & Posner	Self-score	Average of all scores	Manager	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7	C8	C9	C10
Model the Way	42	51.5	28	50	55	59	52	56	47	53	59	57	51
Inspire a Shared Vision	37	48.0	12	51	50	59	52	54	40	44	60	56	50
Challenge the Process	36	51.3	32	53	51	59	49	54	48	48	60	57	53
Enable Others to Act	41	54.4	44	53	59	60	57	52	49	54	60	58	52
Encourage the Heart	45	50.6	39	52	51	59	55	53	38	48	60	53	49

About the LPI Report:
The LPI measured the frequency of 30 specific leadership behaviors on a 10-point scale, with six behavioral statements for each of The Five Practices. A participant and the observers that she selected rated how frequently a participant engaged in each of these behaviors associated with The Five Practices. The response scale was:

1- Almost never	2- Rarely	3- Seldom	4- Once in a While	5- Occassion-ally	6- Sometimes	7- Fairly often	8- Usually	9- Very frequently	10- Almost always

Categories of raters: The LPI Self response was S. LPI placed observers into the following categories: Manager (M); Direct Report (D); Co-Worker (C); and other (O). The average observer rating (AVG) was an average of all LPI observer responses including Manager. The Manager (M) ratings was the only observer whose responses were not anonymous.

Source: Individual feedback report provided by Sally Witherspoon; Kouzes, J.M. & B. Z. Posner (2017). "The Leadership Practices Inventory," *The Leadership Challenge.* Jossey-Bass.

Exhibit 2 - Leadership Practices Inventory

Essay Question Responses
This page contains Observer responses to the open-ended essay questions presented with the LPI. Since answering these questions is optional, each question may not have the same number of answers per question. If no Observer chose to answer a particular question, the response "no one answered this feedback question" will appear in the answer field. All of these qualitative comments are anonymous.

1. *Q: What advice would you give this person to help her develop as a leader within the organization?*
A: Continue to do what she is doing. Seek out new experiences and learn from them. Continue to develop the relationships with people inside and outside of Legend as she has been doing since she first joined Legend. She should continue to inspire those around her with her passion, energy, and drive for results.
B. She should take an active role in challenging how we currently do things at Legend so that we can be more efficient and agile in the future. She should encourage other team members to perform to the best of their abilities, and help foster the younger talent within her group. There have been times when team dynamics have been a challenge on at least one of Sally's projects, so anything she can do to help the group work through issues and develop an environment of trust and collaboration would show great leadership.
C. Keep being positive, approachable, confident, and genuine!
D. Keep doing: 1) Listen well to customers and let them know you listen well by collaborating to meet their needs. 2) Building trust by getting to know and understand co-workers, 3) Being a good communicator in both writing and verbally you are doing or starting to so, and should look to increase the following: 1) involvement in organization-wide activities, 2) Involvement with cross-functional activities, including team members outside of her department, 3) Further develop delegation skills
E. Sally is well respected for her expertise and insight. I think from here onwards, she can expand on this position and reputation and do not hesitate to seek out the highest goals she sets and wants for herself.
F. Keep the same attitude and respect to people as she does now
G. Sally already fits well into a leadership role.
H. Sally could delegate her workload more and give opportunities to others on her team.

2. Q: What should she change or start to do?
A. Sally should start to depend on others to a greater degree and build that confidence that she can lead them and direct their activities at a high level while leaving the details of their tasks for them to work through.
B. Start to take a bigger role in influencing others' behaviors (during meetings, tone during emails, etc.)
C. I wouldn't change anything
D. You are doing or starting to do, and should look to increase the following: 1) involvement in BARDS-wide activities; 2) Involvement with cross-functional activities, including team members outside of BARDS; 3) Further develop delegation skills
E. I think the only advice I have for Sally is to not hesitate to take credit for her work and ability to think critically. It will be beneficial for her and her cross-functional colleagues if she is as much immersed in many aspects of the program as possible, not limited to statistics.

F. Nothing, she does what people are expecting and the job requires

G. Appreciating her contributions

3. Q: What should she continue to do?

A. Sally should continue with her positive energy and "can do" attitude. She should continue with her drive for innovation and her desire to produce impactful solutions to problems. Sally's communication skills are exceptional; she routinely composes concise and well-written emails on project issues that facilitate solutions to these issues. She should continue to work across boundaries to build effective work relationships with internal and external individuals.

B. Continue speaking up during meetings, being proactive, and asking good questions. I've learned a lot from Sally just by listening to what types of questions she asks or the comments she makes during meetings and when reviewing documents. She is one of the more thorough reviewers and always provides very thoughtful input. She should also continue to be collaborative. She has been very willing to teach others about what her group does, even though we know she is busy.

C. She should continue to be exactly who she is!

D. 1) Listen well to customers and let them know you listen well by collaborating to meet their needs; 2) building trust by getting to know and understand co-workers; 3) being a good communicator in both writing and verbally.

E. Continue to do the good jobs she is doing now.

F. Be detailed oriented, thoughtful and collaborative and just the nice and lovely colleague that she is. From my observation she guides her team well and I think she should continue to teach and instruct them.

G. Keep the same work ethic

H. Continue to work collaboratively with all functions and bring knowledge and previous experience to the table.

I. Provide great oversight on her programs, ensure consistency of messaging across all protocols in program

4. Q: What should she stop doing?

A. I cannot think of anything I would encourage her to stop doing.

B. I can't think of anything at the moment. Sally is a very valuable team member and I have used her as an example when speaking with my own manager about what skills I need to work on and who demonstrates them well already.

C. Nothing!

D. At times I feel like you spread yourself a little thin either as a result of taking on more than you can of commitments that you want to do and need to do. Consider either taking on less or improve how you set expectations for things you may not be able to deliver on.

E. Not much that comes to my mind.

F. Not sure, probably nothing

Source: Individual feedback report provided by Sally Witherspoon; Kouzes, J.M. & B. Z. Posner (2017). "The Leadership Practices Inventory," *The Leadership Challenge.* Jossey-Bass.

NOTES

[1] Kouzes, J.M. & B. Z. Posner (2017). The Leadership Challenge. Jossey-Bass.

Kolhatkar, S. (2017). "The Tech Industry's Gender-Discrimination Problem," The New Yorker, November 20, 2017, pp. 26 – 42.